



Rehabilitating wild animals

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James Robinson, who works with the Lab's investigations and policy group, has always been fascinated with animals, particularly the wild ones.

Robinson never really gave much thought to animal rehabilitation however, until he found himself right in the middle of one. A friend's mother is a veterinarian and wildlife rehabilitator in Española. Robinson and the friend Ty were playing in the backyard when they were summoned to help out with a large animal. Expecting to help with a dog, the boys found themselves face to face with a bear.

"So here I am, with Dr. Ramsay asking me to grab hold of a bear's front paws," says Robinson. "She needed more bodies to help carry this bear to a cage, as the animal was still groggy because she had just performed emergency surgery on him. This was my first experience where I really got going in the world of animal rescue and rehabilitation."

The calm after the storm

When it comes to animal rehabilitation, the "storm" typically consists of an animal's rescue and medical treatment. In many cases, animal recovery is a long-term affair, and it is during this calming phase that the chores can be rather mundane, although the reward makes such effort worthwhile every time.

"Every time I hung out with Ty I was introduced more and more into the works of animal rehabilitation," explains Robinson. "There were always chores to do, such as shoveling poop out of the cages and feeding the animals according their specific dietary needs. Every once in a while, I was able to help with rehabilitation directly, such as holding a bird so that Dr. Ramsay could perform a medical treatment on it."

As Robinson learned more and more about what it takes to reintroduce an animal into the wild after healing from an injury, he realized that it was expensive just to keep the animals fed. One example was a bear named "Blue Beary," who had suffered a broken leg. The injury required a long recovery, with an estimated rehabilitation cost of at least \$9,000.

Robinson working with a bear undergoing rehabilitation.

In 2012, Robinson and several others formed the Land of Enchantment Wildlife Foundation, an organization designed to support wildlife rehabilitation operations throughout New Mexico.

“Animal rehabilitation of any kind is incredibly expensive,” says Robinson. “I helped establish this foundation to serve as an umbrella fundraising apparatus to support rehabilitation efforts throughout New Mexico. My foundation does the fundraising and paperwork so that these rehabilitation centers can concentrate on getting wild animals back into their environment.”

Educated compassion

One branch of the Land of Enchantment Wildlife Foundation focuses on education, a critical component because much of New Mexico is rural, which makes encounters with wildlife almost inevitable. For example, Los Alamos is currently experiencing a bear incursion, with the large mammals sometimes wandering the streets and backyards of the community. Working with the Los Alamos Nature Center, the foundation in 2017 held its first Bear Festival to help people to better understand bears and learn how to coexist with them.

“The primary goal of the Bear Festival is to educate people on how cool bears really are,” says Robinson. “They’re not so scary once you get to know them. We just need to know ‘bear-aware’ techniques so that they don’t feel the need to defend themselves. Most people are surprised that in most cases bears will simply run away when encountering humans.”

It is this fear of humans that those involved with animal rehabilitation must always consider during an animal’s convalescence.

“Other than newborns, birds aren’t easily domesticated once they are several weeks old,” says Robinson, “but with mammals like bears, we walk a fine line. While under rehabilitation, we are their primary food source, and they recognize that, so we practice ‘tough love,’ or educated compassion, to facilitate such an animal’s return to the wild. Yes, a bear cub is cute and fuzzy, a fawn has beautiful eyes and a young hawk is majestic, but all of them in the end must return to the wild. That is our duty and ultimately our reward.”

[> Learn more about Robinson’s nonprofit work in his full profile.](#)

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